

the baadasssss success of Melvin Van Peebles: Van Peebles Counting ...
 by Mel Gussow
 New York Times (1923-Current file); Aug 20, 1972; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
 SM14

The baadasssss success of Melvin Van Peebles

By Mel Gussow

His clothes look like remnants from a rummage sale: denims with barely a trace of blue, shirts that look slept in—and usually are. His hair is twisted in tight rows of braids, like a furrowed field, covered by a bright African skullcap. The bristle on his face is not a premeditated beard so much as an accidental accumulation by someone who simply does not have the time or interest to shave.

Around his neck is tattooed a circle of dots which he wears as a permanent necklace. On the left side of his neck, the circle is broken by these words in French: "Couper sur la ligne [cut along the dotted line]". On the right side of his neck, the line is broken by the English word "Cut." This is crossed out and above it is printed "Lynch." "That's only part of it," says Melvin Van Peebles. He unbuckles his belt, drops his trousers and indicates words tattooed on his right buttock. In Bambara, a West African warrior language, it says, "Ni bessé." Van Peebles translates: "If you can."

Lynch me—if you can. "That's my philosophy of life," says Melvin Van Peebles with a mischievous smile.

Melvin Van Peebles is a phenomenon. He is the first black man in show business to beat the white man at his own game. Admirers and detractors—and Van Peebles is controversial among whites and blacks alike—give him high points as promoter and businessman.

"He's a first-rate promoter," says Godfrey Cambridge, who starred in Van Peebles's movie "Watermelon Man." "He can con anybody."

"As a businessman," says Gene Wolsk, co-producer of Van Peebles's musical play, "Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death," "Melvin is in a class with Jean Paul Getty and the Rockefeller family." Some critics think of him as an important and innovative artist; others think he is at best a mimic and an audience exploiter.

He has reached his position of dominance by merging his roles as artist and entrepreneur. "There may be other people," Wolsk says, "who are as good at promoting, but is there anyone else who is also a playwright, composer, director, film-maker, producer, actor, singer and novelist?" By his own description, Van Peebles is "a one-man conglomerate." "If you're gonna have a big mouth," he explains, "you gotta be buttressed." He already has a mountain of nerve and a million dollars' worth of buttress.

The key to his success, besides his talent, is in his audience, what he calls his "constituency." He

From the Van Peebles oeuvre: Police question a black suspect in the hit movie "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" (above) and, at right, Toney Brealond as the transvestite, with Albert Hall, in a scene from the musical "Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death."

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has uncovered this audience, popularized its culture and broken racial barriers. The audience was always there, but until Van Peebles no one seemed to know exactly how to reach it. He proved that black could be bountiful, marginal could be mass and ethnic would sell.

His third movie, "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song," which he wrote, directed, produced, composed music for and starred in, cost \$500,000 to film and grossed around \$10-million at the box office. "It made \$5-million before three white people had seen it," says Van Peebles proudly. "The real message of 'Sweetback' is that we have the key to our own box office. It's the black dollars, the disenfranchised dollars, that go to see those products." The success of "Sweetback" has spawned a long line of imitators. There is now a black film industry. "There are five illegitimate sons of 'Sweetback' playing right now in movie theaters on Broadway," said Van Peebles recently. He is planning "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song, Part Two," starring, of course, Van Peebles.

This summer, Van Peebles has had two shows on Broadway, which is more than one can say for Neil Simon or David Merrick. "Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death," with music, lyrics and book by Van Peebles, opened last October and was the fifth longest running show on Broadway by the time it closed at the end of July. His new show, "Don't Play Us Cheap," not only has music, lyrics and book by Van Peebles. He produced it with his own money and directed it. He has also made three record albums on which he sings (in addition to albums of his shows and movies) and has written five novels.

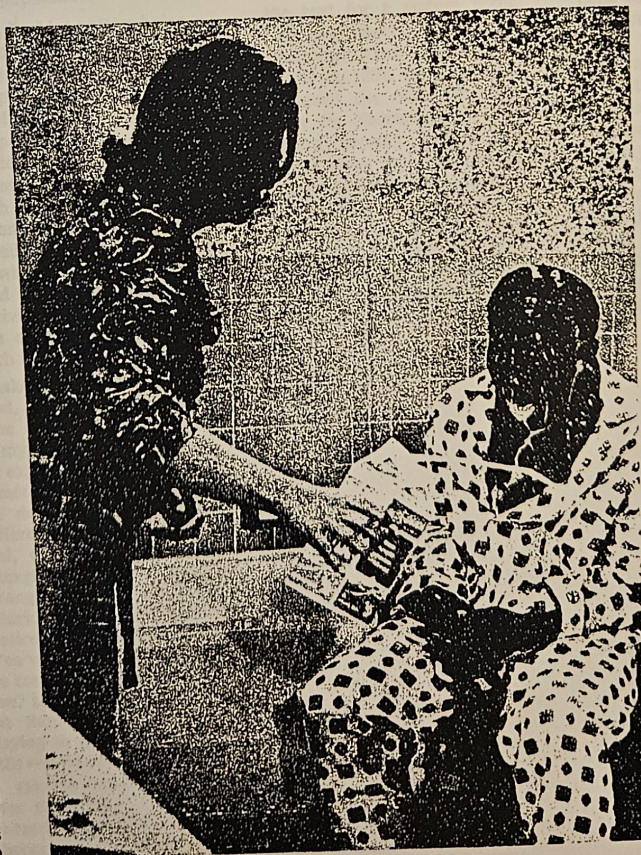
To the outsider, Van Peebles's career is marked by its diversity. His first novel, "A Bear for the F.B.I.," was an almost elegiac reminiscence about a black boyhood in the Midwest. His first movie, "The Story of a Three Day Pass," was a tender love story about a black G.I. and a French girl, a conscious attempt to make "a French movie." "Watermelon Man," made in Hollywood but a conscious (though unsuccessful) attempt to avoid making a Hollywood-style movie, was a farce about a white bigot who wakes up one day as a black man. With its broad style, it seemed firmly rooted in television situation comedy.

"Sweetback" was a priapic and vicious racial chase about, says Van Peebles, "the radicalization of a stud." The plot was familiar—the innocent hounded by the authorities, forced to seek sanctuary among the lawless—but Sweetback is black, and his blackness is the reason for the film. The scenes of violence are explosively effective, the scenes of sex (of which there are many) are gamy and sometimes hilarious.

"Aint Supposed to Die," his most forceful and fully conceived work, is a collage of songs, soliloquies spoken to music, and dances in which blacks—some in the most desperate circumstances—reveal their loves, fears and aspirations in homely and deeply felt poetry. The lyrics are resonant with the language of the street. A young black in jail remembers a girl named Lilly and a dance called Zampoughi—"Zam-poug-hi," the word becomes a cry of sex and liberation. A Lesbian lingers wistfully near the Women's House of Detention and calls to her friend, "Baby, is you gonna ever come back and dance with me?" The play ends with a Moms Mabley type of old woman attacking the audience with "Put a Curse on You," in which she excoriates humanity for its injustices—although many have wrongly interpreted the curse as being exclusively antiwhite.

As staged by Gilbert Moses in a ghetto setting of fire escapes and back alleys, "Aint Supposed to Die" provides an uncompromising but humane look at subjugated people. In contrast, "Don't Play Us

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In "Don't Play Us Cheap" (top), the musical adapted from one of Van Peebles's five novels, Joe Keyes Jr. is a demon who invades a Harlem party. At left, Godfrey Cambridge, as the white bigot who mysteriously turns black in the film "Watermelon Man," is given a milk bath by his wife (played by Estelle Parsons).

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Van Peebles

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One result of his work is that he has given employment to blacks in many areas of the theater and movies—not only as performers but as stage managers, wardrobe mistresses, costume designers, technicians. As comedian Bill Cosby says, "Hundreds of black people are getting jobs because of Melvin's steel-like arms pushing doors open that were never opened before."

The range of criticism has been astounding. Van Peebles has been adored and derided for the same work (sometimes in the same review). Critics take him personally—some as an offense to their decency. There is no predicting where his support will come from. Two of the most ardent fans of "Sweetback" were the movie reviewers for Cue magazine and Huey Newton, who, in the fortnightly paper The Black Panther, extolled the film as a great revolutionary document. Many white critics who despised "Aint Supposed to Die," embraced "Don't Play Us Cheap" for its warmth and friendliness, while Jet magazine thought the music was not black enough ("How would they know?" asked Van Peebles) and the reviewer on The Black American, a weekly newspaper, called the show "tripe" and reminded his readers that he was no fan of "Aint Supposed to Die."

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reviews don't sell tickets at his box office and the bad reviews don't damage him psychologically. "If I needed approval," he says, "I would never have done any of this. Each of the things was absolutely insane and impossible."

The truth is that for all his aggressiveness and image-building he seems an extraordinarily well-adjusted and coolly confident man. Wherever he goes, he is at home. He looks and talks like a street black ("like a field hand," his detractors say), which is how he defines his "constituency." The typical member of that constituency, he tells listeners, is "not the black that you meet, the erudite black that forms the bull—buffer zone. Those people are just as indignant about my work as the whites are—they don't want their hole card peeped. My constituency is the guy in the street who makes up 90 per cent of the black population."

Van Peebles enjoys being a man of the people—but the role is also good for business. His speech is a free-flowing mix of black slang and Broadway patois ("sweetiepie" is a favorite word). His plays and movies are his "product" which he is selling to his "constituency." "I started off as a kid selling second-hand clothes to winos—at a price they could afford," he says. "It's survival knowledge. My business acumen hasn't changed much since then."

Asked to talk about his childhood, Van Peebles refuses. "The most important factor in my life is that I'm black," he explains. "Everything else comes in such a poor fifth." He does not recognize that differences in economic, social, educational or regional background can essentially change a black man's life. Black is black. "You may not notice it, but you're still black. You've got all those problems to confront. You don't believe me? Look, give me a big party at Sardi's, then watch me trying to get a cab. After all the — is over, you're black."

On the jacket of "A Bear for the F.B.I.," he described himself as having "a happily bourgeois childhood," which is very close to the truth. Like the protagonist, he was born (40 years ago tomorrow) on

the South Side of Chicago, the son of a tailor. Van is his middle name. "It's on the old birth certificate," he says. "I think my mother just thought it sounded aristo." Somewhere later in life, Van became part of his last name. "When I was 12, I was angry at my parents for not naming me Tarzan."

He grew up in Phoenix, Ill., a suburb of Chicago, and graduated from Thornton Township High School in 1949. After a year at West Virginia State College, he transferred to Ohio Wesleyan, graduating in 1953 with a better than B average and a B.A. in English literature. Of his adolescence, he recalls that he was considered a bratty child. "People thought it was orneriness. I have since discovered that it was self-awareness. I was trying to stand on my constitutional rights."

After college, he joined the Air Force, became a navigator, survived several threats of courtmartial and served three and one-half years. Briefly he painted in Mexico, then moved to San Francisco, where he supported his wife and two children by working as a gripman on a cable car. He wrote the text for a picture book, "The Big Heart," about cable cars, and when it was published in 1957, he was fired. He sued the cable-car company for discrimination. "My record showed that I had never been late or absent. They said I was psychologically set to have a big accident. I went to the F.E.P.C. They said, did anybody call you nigger? I said no. Well, how can you call it discrimination? I looked up the firing rate at

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One day he was watching a movie in the Fillmore district, "something like 'Mr. Joe's Goin' to the Big House,' in which they say, 'Will you sing?' while the lights dim and they electrocute him. I just got tired of seeing — and I said I can do better than that." The impulse toward movie-making came not from "love, but from disgust." He knew nothing about movies.

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He improvised. "I edited the film in a closet. I didn't know it was called editing. I was gluing it together." He didn't have the money to hire someone to score his film so he did it himself, although he could not read or write music or play an instrument. To this day he composes on a kazoo. Lack of knowledge has never deterred him from anything. As he says, "What's so bad about not knowing?"

Looking back on his initial film experience, he says, "It cost me my wife, two children and my car." To help pay for the film he held three jobs at once and took in a roomer. "One day my wife said, 'What would you say if I told you I was sleeping with the roomer?' I said, 'I'd raise his rent.'"

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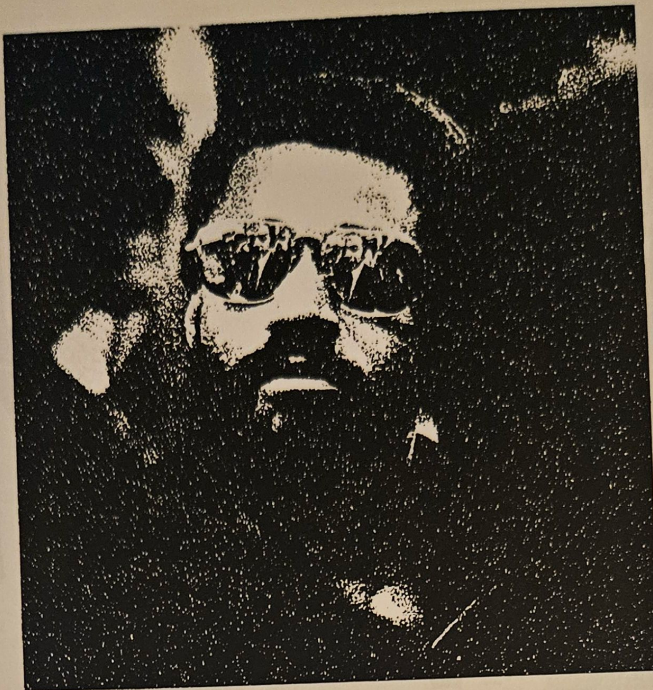
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Counting the house



Van Peebles checks the audience at "Don't Play Us Cheap."

that retort at the time or thought of it later, it is revealing: In pursuit of his movie career, everything else took second place. Everyone thought he was crazy—an unknown, untrained black man making movies. His Hollywood offers were limited to elevator-operator jobs. In 1959, he packed up his disintegrating household and moved to Europe. In the Netherlands on the G.I. Bill he studied astronomy and acted with the Dutch National Theater. One of his roles was as Rio Rita, the homosexual boxer, in Brendan Behan's "The Hostage." His marriage finally broke up and he moved to Paris where he worked at a variety of tasks from singing and dancing outside of theaters to writing for French periodicals. For nine years, his average income was \$600 a year. Asked how he managed to survive, he answers quickly, "Off women."

He moved in and out of affairs and apartments. "The trouble with countesses and baronesses," he says, "is that they don't have anything to do all day so they got you walking their poodles and going to cocktail parties and you can't get any work done. I always preferred working girls. They put in 10 hours a day and were tired when they got home. I had all day to write."

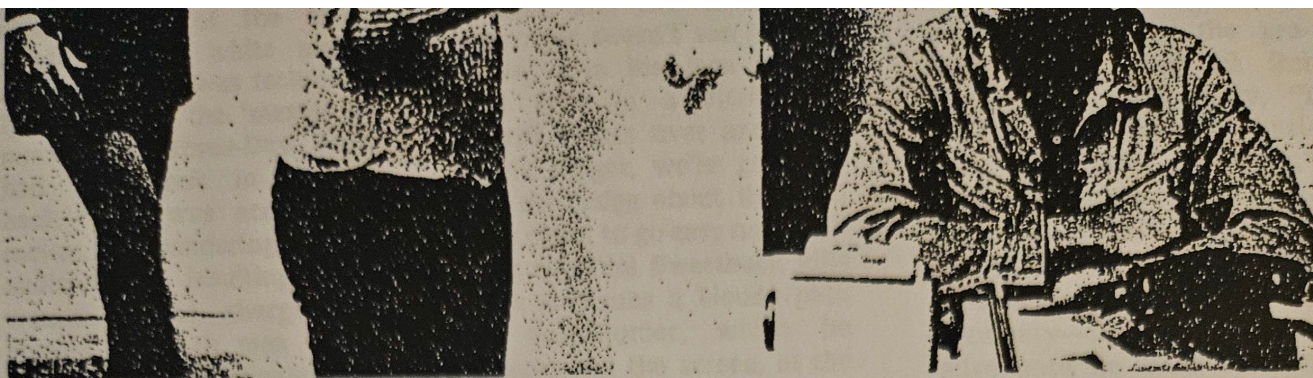
Van Peebles published his five novels in France, writing "A Bear for the F.B.I." in English, the others in French.

They cover an even broader range than the films and plays. In Van Peebles's words, "A Bear for the F.B.I." is the tale of "a good Jewish boyhood in blackface." It is his "Goodbye, Columbus," only nicer—one might say more wholesomely American. It is about a young boy's awakening to prejudice, education and sex and his fondness for the Boy Scout life—hiking, camping, winning merit badges.

"The Chinaman of the 14th District" Van Peebles describes as a kind of contemporary French variation on "The Canterbury Tales": During an electrical workers' strike, habitués of a French cafe gather around an oil lamp and each tells a story. "The True American," which was also translated into Spanish and published in Mexico, is a picaresque comic novel about a black man and a white man who meet in hell and are involved "in a series of very Candide-Pangloss things." Bantam plans to publish it here next spring.

"The Party in Harlem," inspired by an actual party Van Peebles attended in Harlem, later formed the basis for "Don't Play Us Cheap," and "La Permission," about black-white love in Paris became, in 1967, "The Story of a Three-Day Pass."

Obtaining a subsidy from the French Government, he wrote the film treatment, directed it, supervised the editing, wrote half the mu-



At his office desk, Van Peebles gets a report from Wilma Moses of his production staff.

sic and took the picture to the San Francisco Film Festival as the French delegate. "That was a kick," he remembers. "Nobody believed it. 'You're the French delegate?'" The movie was a hit with the critics and Hollywood began making overtures.

One of the first things he realized on his return to the U.S. was that "black music didn't mirror the black movement forward." He began writing music and lyrics "that were indigenous to the man in the street." He made three albums, beginning with "Brer Soul." The songs—sometimes raucous, sometimes lyrical—were about the inner lives of the dispossessed. The records, says Van Peebles, "were mostly a succès d'estime." Later, they formed the basis of "Aint Supposed to Die."

Finally, he signed a contract with Columbia Pictures to make "Watermelon Man" from a story by Herman Raucher, who later wrote "Summer of '42." "Eighty per cent of the energy on 'Watermelon Man' was not spent on the set but fighting in the corridors of power." One of the first battles was over casting. "They were looking for a white guy to play in black face. Three-quarters of the film the guy is black. I said, 'Let's have a black guy in white face.' Their reaction

was, 'Is that possible?' The king can play a valet but can the valet play a king? They didn't understand the racist implication of this question." Godfrey Cambridge played the role, the first part in whiteface. Van Peebles had conflicts with the author, the producer and the actors. He rewrote the ending so that Cambridge stayed black instead of switching back to white. As Van Peebles recalls, the producer was astounded and protested: "You filmed it from a black point of view!"

Van Peebles learned several lessons from this experience. "People deal in compromise," he says. "I wasn't trying to do a consensus. I was trying to do a goddamn film. The studios have the power in Hollywood. One morning, I was shaving and I looked in the mirror and I said, 'You think you're a studio. Therefore you are a studio.'"

To produce his next picture independently, he used \$70,000 he had earned making "Watermelon Man" and borrowed the rest. The film was "Sweetback," shot on the run in Watts, with a largely non-union crew ("I had an agreement with the unions; you don't know black people—I don't know you") and a cast filled with amateurs. For the role of Sweetback—"a gigolo, a pimp and a stud—I needed

someone who wouldn't give me a difficult time with the terrible shooting schedule, someone with enough experience who hadn't been softened by the media. Add that all up and run it through and it came out me." There was one occupational hazard. An unswerving womanizer, Van Peebles carried some of the love scenes past the point of simulation, and for his efforts contracted gonorrhea. "I applied for workmen's compensation—and got it," he insists.

He edited and scored the picture and then tried to distribute it. "Only two theaters in the entire United States would take it—a bingo house in Detroit called the Grand Circus and a little theater in Atlanta, Ga. The Grand Circus usually dug about \$5,500 a week. We did \$7,500 the first night." The picture set records in both theaters. With the help of Cinemation, a company that distributes films exploiting sex and violence, it turned into a blockbuster and soon was playing all across the country.

"I didn't go out expecting any support from the media," he says, "I made the film critic-proof by going for my audience." His initial appeal to that audience was in his title. Repeatedly he was urged to change it but he refused: "If I called it 'The Ballad of

the Indomitable Sweetback,' which would be the translation into whiteness, a guy would say, 'Oh, yes, that's nice,' but if you bad enough to put 'Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song' up there, you don't have to tell him anything else."

His advertising was equally calculating: "My public doesn't read The New York Times. They listen to WWRL. What catches their attention is not some dried-up advertising. I just lay it out there like I thought of it. 'Hey, brother, you want to see where it's at? See this.'"

Most of the reviews were unfavorable. "The black media was very insulted that I didn't choose a more respectable segment of the black condition. The white media assumed that I was technically inept, that the 'master of nuance' of 'Three-Day Pass' had run amok in 'Sweetback.'" He was accused of racism, of pandering to his audience, of insulting black women. "That charge was leveled by black men whose old ladies were digging the film."

To the complaint that the hero is a pimp, a murderer and a martyr, he says, "It's a straight, old, true story. He's defending himself on a number of occasions. He ain't no outlaw. There's no

law he's obliged to respect. More black guys 'advancing on people' manage to be found with bullets in their backs. Sweetback just makes up 90 per cent of the bloods on the street. Of course he's not a dentist or a U.N. delegate—I admit you that."

Did he consider having Sweetback die in the end? He bristled. "You've got to be kidding. The whole thing is I wanted them to enjoy it. I got tired of seeing black guys killed. Normally, the way the film would have ended—he would have gotten almost to the border and across a dusty road comes a little girl with a hula hoop. And here comes a big truck from the other direction. She doesn't see the truck and the truck doesn't see her. He dives, gets his legs broken and falls in a ditch. The sheriff comes over and says, 'Well, nigger, we're going to tell the judge about that and he's going to go easy on you.'"

In the film Sweetback kills cops and runs a bloody path to the border, which he crosses. On the screen, at the end, are the words: "Watch out. A baadasssss nigger is coming back to collect some dues." The audience loved every hairy minute. At one showing at the Cinerama Theater in New York, the audience reaction to the scene

in which a police car is blown up was so loud that three real policemen burst into the theater from Broadway to see what had happened. "Glee is the word. You see some biddybop cat come in thinking, what is this? They forget they supposed to be cool. In drive-ins they flash their lights and blow their horns. It sounds like the Roman Colosseum."

Last year Charles Blackwell, now Van Peebles's production associate, suggested that Van Peebles's record albums might be turned into a musical. For \$150,000 "Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death" opened on Broadway at the Ethel Barrymore Theater on Oct. 20, 1971. Most of the reviews were hostile. The advance sale, say the producers, was about \$9. But Van Peebles said flatly, "I ain't budgin'! We're in business. It's going to work." With his producers still dubious, he promised to guarantee losses up to \$100,000 with his own money—more if necessary—to keep the show alive until he could find its audience.

He immediately went to work, taking charge of the advertising, organizing a sales force to send out publicity to every black group—church, school, fraternal, social—within 200 miles of Manhattan, soliciting orders for blocks of tickets. Prices were flexible. "We weren't turning anyone away," says Gene Wolsk. "We were dealing like pushcarts." Because of "Sweetback," Van Peebles was anathema in some middle-class black circles and Ossie Davis was drafted as a respected emissary. By himself, and later with Van Peebles, Davis went from group to group boosting the show.

Slowly sales increased. By Christmas, "Aint Supposed to Die" was breaking even (at \$24,000 a week); for several weeks it made a small profit. In January, it moved to the Ambassador. (The Shuberts wanted the Barrymore for other incoming shows, all of which flopped.) In a characteristic gesture of confidence in the face of adversity, Van Peebles decided "to declare January 'Black Solidarity Behind Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death Month,'" and invited celebrities like Bill Cosby, Ossie Davis and Shirley Chisholm to take part in the performances. For its last seven months, the show consistently hovered around the break-even point. It did not return the backers' invest-

"The Story of a Three-Day Pass"



Harry Baird and Nicole Berger as an American G.I. and his Parisian sweetheart in Van Peebles's first (1967) movie.

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Opening night

ment (Van Peebles eventually sank \$85,000 into the show) but the planned nationwide tour next season and the projected movie sale should convert it into a financial success. Meanwhile, it paid salaries—most of them to blacks—and made reputations.

It also made converts. Looking back, Van Peebles says, "It would have been nice if the reviews had been good because that would have given me the white audience, which would have acted as a cushion until the black audience came. But it didn't matter. Clive Who? Douglas What's What? Richard Whom? Instead, the black audience acted as a cushion until the whites started to come.

"I learned a lot of things about Broadway. I learned that it is underfinanced"—which is why shows close before they can find an audience. "It isn't geared at all to black-audience ticket buying. They don't do a lot of mail orders. Joan Baez will sell out three months in advance. James Brown will sell 40 per cent to 60 per cent of his tickets the night of the concert. But he will still sell out." Many of the tickets to "Aint Supposed to Die" were sold the night of the performance.

Last spring, with "Aint Supposed to Die" finally established, Van Peebles decided to stage another musical—"Don't Play Us Cheap"—despite the fact that no one in his right mind would open a musical on Broadway so late in the season. But Van Peebles is never one to respect precedent. With typical show-business heresy, he even filmed the production in New Mexico prior to the Broadway opening (the film version will be released in the fall). In financing the show with his own money (earnings from "Sweetback"), he also violated the producers' rules of order: "One of the dictums in the business is never use your own money. What fascinates me is how many people abdicate their artistic autonomy in lieu of doing it themselves."

He did everything himself, from casting the show (largely with unknowns) to directing—the first time he had staged a show. The musical opened at the Barrymore on May 16 and Van Peebles disarmed the critics. Those who had hated him now loved him. But in the beginning,

business for "Don't Play Us Cheap" was even slower than it had been for "Aint Supposed to Die." Again the show should have closed, but Van Peebles, even with his own money in jeopardy, was unperturbed. He simply doubled his efforts, used one show to push the other—and gradually grosses began to climb.

Van Peebles's office is adjacent to the office of Emanuel Azenberg and Gene Wolsk, both co-producers of "Aint Supposed to Die" and general managers of "Don't Play Us Cheap." A disarray of posters and handbills, it has the earmarks of a campaign storefront. Van Peebles's workday usually begins at 8 A.M. and ends at midnight, or later. Often he spends the night sleeping on a couch in the office (washing out his underwear and leaving it to dry in his producers' bathroom).

He rents a loft in Manhattan where he stores a few possessions, which include a long leather coat—his single concession to his newly acquired wealth. Otherwise he looks, dresses and lives exactly as he did before he achieved success. He also has an office in Los Angeles, with another couch there for sleeping. He has few close friends and considers himself a recluse.

Asked what he does with his money, he smiles and says, "I'm not into the business for the money. I'm into the money for the business." This is a favorite refrain, and there is no reason to be skeptical about it. Money for him means artistic and commercial freedom.

At 8 A.M. on a recent morning, a knock at his office door is answered by a loud voice: "Nobody here!" The door is opened and there is Van Pee-

bles, looking tired after only three hours' sleep. It has been a back-breaking night, cutting records of "Don't Play Us Cheap." Work began at 10 P.M. and ended at 5 A.M. After a Spartan breakfast he returns to the office full of his usual boundless energy to begin a morning filled with phone calls, meetings and decisions. He talks with a man who is trying to persuade him to sell souvenir programs of his shows. He confers in French with the woman who is helping to translate into English the novel from which "Don't Play Us Cheap" was made.

His personal secretary, Catherine Cook, comes in and he gives her a hug, a gesture repeated with almost every woman who enters the office.

He asks her for a copy of the newest issue of Jet and reads from it: "Black films—boom or bust. By commercial

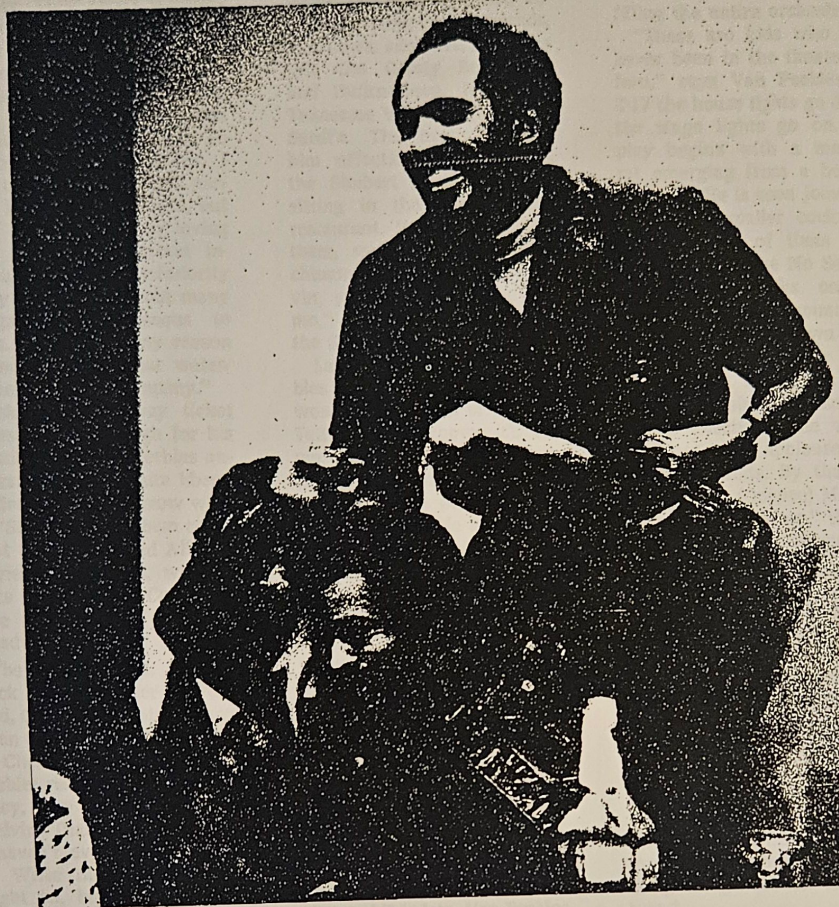
standards 'Shaft'... hard-living, fast-loving... played with spirit and spunk by ex-college football star Richard Roundtree, is the all-time black-is-beautiful film. By the same economic standards, 'Nothing But a Man'... is not beautiful at all. Again by commercial standards, black filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles's uproarious and controversially explosive 'Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,' which reportedly grossed near \$10-million with huge chunks of the profits remaining in Van Peebles's pockets, is also very lovely and beautiful...!"

He puts Jet down, and says angrily, "'Shaft' and 'Nothing But a Man' are white films, studio films, but when they talk about 'Sweetback,' huge chunks remain in my pockets. The whole significance is that 'Sweetback' was done with third-world technicians. It has enabled the start of this whole empire. It wouldn't have been possible under the auspices of MGM. Roundtree didn't make \$12,000 on 'Shaft' and they're still bragging about 'Shaft' as a black money-maker." He seems as annoyed with Jet as he is with MGM. "Jet is black-owned, or owned by people with tinted skin. That doesn't make it black."

Then he starts talking about "media resistance" to Van Peebles, the "blackout" of him and his shows in the press and on network television. "I've had parallel publicity and advertising circuits," which have given him "a grassroots constituency." He talks about standing outside the theater handing out leaflets. "I had one old lady come back and say, 'I brought four more.' That lady brings four, then eight more will come. I had a group from the Ebenezer Baptist Church. 'Hey, folks, enjoy that? Here's another product.' The Bar Association came. I didn't know what it was. It was the Barmaids Association of Brooklyn and Bronx. They said, 'Could we have cocktails?' They brought their own glasses. Those are the people. That's my constituency."

"I'm trying to provide them with a sense of self. Look, Jesus Christ was white. Santa Claus was white. Ralph Bunche was white. You never saw anybody that you could say, 'that's me. You don't realize what that can spark in kids who've never been able to see themselves. Or never heard their language being talked. This legitimizes them in their own minds. They become somebody."

"My constituency can come



Van Peebles (seated) and an aide react to a TV review of "Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death." Most reviews were hostile, but word of mouth built an audience. "Forty per cent of the people who come to my work have never been in the theater before," says Van Peebles.

in to 'Don't Play Us Cheap' and they don't feel intimidated. 'That's me, man. I've been to the party.' It is very different from Amos and Andy. These people have their dignity. They aren't stumble-bums or petty crooks. The show doesn't laugh at their blackness. I'm trying to recapture our humorous images. You can have humor with dignity. It doesn't have to be eye-rolling and massa-dis. I love those Saturday night parties. People love 'em too, but they feel guilty about loving 'em. There is a certain inarticulate sense of inferiority many blacks feel about many things very indigenous to them. I don't see any reason for not enjoying your watermelon in white company."

Asked if Broadway ticket prices aren't too high for his constituency, Van Peebles answers: "That's a white liberal syndrome. Do you know what the 'Shaft' record album costs, what the Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier fight costs, what it costs to go to the Copa? We have the cheapest seats on Broadway."

The phone rings. It is a black theater owner in Portland, Ore., who wants to know when the movie of "Don't Play Us Cheap" is coming out. Van Peebles reaches for the phone. "Hey, how ya doin'? This is Melvin. That's me, man. . . . I haven't even begun to edit it. Write me in September. Right on, brother. Hey, man—no sweat." He hangs up the phone and says, "Cats are

mumbling and groaning, but the little people on the street are calling in."

At the Ethel Barrymore Theater, he checks backstage, banters with the cast, then walks down 47th Street, repeatedly stopped by friends, associates, admirers. He walks into the Gaiety Restaurant and Delicatessen. It is like Tennessee Williams going into Sardi's. The hostess greets him affectionately. He sees the Shubert business family sitting in the back of the restaurant. He walks over to them, says hello, sits down chummily at their table. "Melvin, you're a one-man dynamo," says Gerald Schoenfeld, the Shubert attorney.

Later, in a booth, Van Peebles says to the waitress, "I would like a nosh of brisket. Tell him. He knows it's for me. For Melvin. I like it with fat. I like the cheaper cuts of the brisket." A piece of fatty brisket arrives. He admires it. "That's got character. I'm not a great fan of straight meats. I like the bone and the gristle. Filet mignon, forget it. Those nice, terrible, greasy restaurants—I love them." With great relish he eats the brisket. How is his health? "Fine. Don't smoke, drink, chew, fool with girls that do."

Wednesday matinee at "Don't Play Us Cheap." It is 2:10 and the theater is almost empty. The curtain is being held. A bus caravan is due and it is late. Van Peebles casually settles himself in the

back row. Nobody seems impatient. Suddenly the buses arrive and young people, all of them black, walk down the aisle, snapping their fingers, looking shiftily from side to side. They sit down, almost filling the entire orchestra.

"These are kids who have never been in the theater before," says Van Peebles. At 2:17 the house lights go down, the stage lights go on. The play begins with a mansize rat emerging from a hole in the wall. He is soon joined by a slightly smaller cockroach and the two of them sing, "Just Don't Make No Sense." Van Peebles talks on the telephone to his sound engineer. "Bring the two back speakers up. Give me more on the right. Give me a left." He adjusts his sound until he has it exactly as he wants. Laughter and applause. Excitement builds. By the time that George (Ooppee) McGurn sings "Quittin' Time," the audience is having a party.

In a small dressing room high above the theater, Van Peebles sits at a dressing table. "People assume I'm trying to copy traditional and make a bad copy," he says. "Different' when it happens to come from black Americans is not considered different. It's considered a mistake. If I was from Pakistan or China, they would say, maybe there's something that we don't know, maybe he's expressing something indigenous to his culture."

Does he see himself as a revolutionary? "In this milieu, survival puts you immediately in confrontation with politics. I don't really talk about these things. Everything is in enemy territory." He denies that his reluctance to talk about politics expresses his timidity. "It has nothing to do with being timid. It has to do with winning. You don't call a general timid if he doesn't give you the battle plans for a march."

He refuses to disclose his battle plans, but suggests: "The artistic and sometimes the political and sociological ambitiousness of the product varies in direct ratio to the amount of clout I have."

Now that he has enormous clout, what will he do next? "I can't say because I don't want to intimidate me. There are so many things I'd like to do. Working on a product from one end to another takes about a year every time. After each one of these things, there's a big council meeting inside my head. The council is convening these days. Everyone is screaming, 'Me next!'" ■